

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

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RUPERT CLINTON

The Golden Age

Part One

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NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

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TWO SHILLINGS AND SIXPENCE

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It was an unusual phenomena for Mars—a cloud just could not exist there. But this one did and brought with it some complex problems.

E C H O

by LEE HARDING

It all began with a smudge on one of McGivern's survey photos.

"There are no clouds on Mars, young man," I said, regarding the 5in. x 5in. xerographic print dubiously. "Not like this there aren't."

Tom shrugged his skinny shoulders. "Well, you tell *me* what it is, then."

I studied the photograph carefully. Like the majority of the aerial reconnaissance shots processed in our labs the result was a dark, almost featureless grey. The films we were using were ultra-red sensitive, designed to yield a highly-contrasty image and throw any such things as vegetation, canyons, fissures and the like into bold relief. For the most part it was dreadfully monotonous. When it came around to arranging the hundreds of prints into a mosaic for re-photographing it was easy to go quietly mad.

But this shot was different. There was a white, egg-shaped blob about half an inch long slightly off-centre of the picture.

I grunted. "It looks like a fog-mark."

McGivern shook his head. "Uh, uh. That was the first thing I checked. And besides. I've never seen a fog-mark like that."

"There's always a first time for everything." I picked up a hand magnifier and studied the area in question. It certainly didn't look like a typical Martian cloud. With the exception of a few wispy, pseudo-cumulus traces around the poles, such things were virtually non-existent.

The most curious features were the regularity of its edges. They were razor-sharp beneath the magnifying glass.

Most decidedly un-cloudlike.

"It could be reflection," I mused. "Or some form of atmospheric haze."

The look in Tom's eyes frankly expressed his doubts.

I sighed heavily and got up from behind my desk. "All right then, let's both go and have a look at the negative."

We went around to the processing room and I waited patiently while he spun off the roll of negatives across the opal screen.

"That's it."

I leaned over his shoulder and studied the negative carefully. "You're right. It certainly doesn't *look* like a fog mark." I straightened up. "And how big would you say it was?"

He did some swift mental arithmetic. "The altitude reading says thirty thousand feet. Using a five inch lens that would work out to, oh—say roughly three miles long. Something like that."

I stared back at the puzzling picture. "How long ago was this run completed?"

"This lot came in yesterday so it couldn't have been more than twenty-four hours previous to that."

"Any idea how far away that area is?"

"I can check with the Bird boys."

"Do that right away, would you?" I pressed the switch and watched the roll of negatives spool swiftly off into the machine. "Anything unusual would be worth investigating around this God-forsaken planet. Even if it is some form of optical phenomena it will at least break the monotony."

He grinned happily and shot off to get the required information from the Bird hangers.

I was back at my desk poking gloomily at a mess of prints when he came bouncing in, face flushed with excitement.

"Well?" I asked.

"A hundred and eighty-seven miles north-east of Base at a rough estimate. Fortunately, the Bird that made this particular run only had a very small area over by the Plains to cover, otherwise it might have been days before this thing cropped up."

The Birds are the automated aerial survey platforms we use to map the surface of Mars, the object being to prepare detail maps in preparation for the swarm of geologists we're expecting to land out here just as soon as the political squabbling over appropriations simmers down a bit back home. Some like to call them Pigeons because they all return to Base with an unerring cybernetic instinct similar to a true homing bird. To most of us they're simply—The Birds.

"You'd better hop out and take a look at it," I said. "Nobody's noticed it out there before." The Plains area was a spot frequented by Base personnel at least several times a week during prospecting and ecological forays. It lay at the foot of a long, low series of mounds that at one time must have been a great mountain range but which time had weathered down to a pitiful remainder.

Systematic aerial mapping had only begun a little over a week ago and it was only natural that we should begin our operations in the immediate vicinity of the Base, particularly as the Plains area had surrendered the most promising mineral deposits.

We had certainly never seen clouds forming out there before.

I sent McGivern off with two of the boys on relief from the Wall and sat down to wait. I had a feeling that I should have gone myself, but what the heck? It would probably turn out to be non-existent when the boys and their floater arrived to scour the land beneath the lens of the survey Bird. Just a combination of atmospheric phenomena coupled with tricky light rays and probably a bit of muck over the lens. Or something flying past beneath the Bird. No, that was even more preposterous.

And why hadn't it happened before?

My head ached trying to find solutions before the jeep arrived back. I'm no scientist. Cartography's my business, which is just a fancy way of saying I draw maps. If this thing was going to turn out to be a wild goose chase then I was better off trying to catch up on my own work. There was plenty of it.

The jeep arrived back late in the afternoon. I was on my way back from the messrooms when I saw the hovercraft arrowing in across the horizon. I crawled into a suit and went out to meet them.

A ghost of a breeze was ruffling sand around their feet as they alighted from the jeep. I couldn't make out their features behind their helmets as I approached but their very manner seemed to telegraph apprehension. I quickened my steps and drew up to them.

"Well?" I asked, my voice carrying across the arid Martian air without the benefit of radio assistance. "What's the verdict?"

McGivern turned to face me, his expression sombre and a trifle bewildered behind the plasti-glass of the suit helmet. "Oh, it's there all right. And it's bigger."

I froze, staring curiously back at the three stiff figures. "How do you mean?"

He shrugged, stiffly in the insulated suit, and said: "It just seems bigger, that's all."

"What's it like?"

"A cloud. A silly, damn cloud . . ."

"It's like nothing I've ever seen," one of the other boys put in.

"It's not like any cloud I've ever seen," the other suddenly spluttered. I could see he was more nervous than the others. Just what had we stumbled upon?

"We circled around it for about half an hour or so," McGivern explained. "We flew through it without any trouble."

"That was a damn fool thing to do," I snapped.

"It was just a cloud . . ."

"Cloud nothing. That's no more a cloud than I am. The three of you get over and wait in my office until I get back. And not a word to anybody about this, you understand?"

They nodded assent and I left them and made a bee-line for Thompson's quarters.

Our commanding officer isn't a man easily excitable. He listened to my report with a calm, detached expression that made me wonder at first if he was really listening. His remarks at the conclusion of my speech soon dispelled this idea.

"Do you think there's a possibility that these boys could be a little on the impressionable side?" he asked shrewdly.

I shrugged. "No more than most. But there must be something out there, Ted . . ."

"Undoubtedly, undoubtedly. Whether or not it's worth all the trouble of investigating further I don't know. You fellows seem to get all fired up over the littlest things."

"Little or not, anything alien is worth investigating."

"True, true." He pursed his lips and grinned roguishly. I felt foolish at having let him draw me out so easily. He knew damn well how important this whole thing was to the rest of us. To Commander Edward Thompson it was only a job. Perhaps that was why he was the head of the whole operation and the rest of us merely the cogs in the wheel. Who was it said that dreamers never make good generals?

"While I'm inclined to believe that this planet is as dead as the proverbial doornail," he went on, "I can't very well go having everybody else around here believing that, now can I? All right, we'll go out and have a look at this Cloud of McGivern's. And, by God, it had better be there . . ."

I hoped for Tom's sake that it would be.

The following morning, Thompson ordered one of the big jeeps readied and together with McGivern and Stewart, one of the boys off duty from the Wall, we set off to find our mysterious cloud.

I hadn't mentioned anything to Eric Kemp yet. I had seen him disappointed too often to raise any false hopes for him. And besides, he had been working a sixteen hour shift out along the Wall for a number of days, working slowly and painfully with the men under his command and trying to uncover the fragile remnants of a technological feat that had existed for millions of years. The Wall was only a few pitiful feet high above the desert and crumbling for most of its hundred and fifty mile length. But it was something to work on, something to make the existence of Base worthwhile. What did it matter if the results of all their careful chipping and brushing and rubbing amounted to little more than a handful of almost invisible heiroglyphics per mile? As long as there was *something*.

It mattered to Eric. Quite simply, it wasn't enough. Even the biologists had something more to go on. An alien world

was easily visible beneath their microscopes, a world teeming with bacteriological life of infinite variety.

Eric's world was dead a thousand centuries before we arrived. It was like ferreting in a graveyard for a few baubles and then finding they were useless. No wonder he felt bitter.

The trip took just over an hour. These new jeeps can kick along at a pretty smart pace in the rarified Martian atmosphere. A cool hundred and forty miles an hour is little effort.

For the most part, the area of the planet immediately surrounding the Base is composed of gently undulating hills that resemble dunes more than anything else. The landscape gives more the appearance of a gently rolling sea. After about a hundred and twenty miles the surface smoothes out into a long, flat, featureless desert that seems to stretch towards infinity.

This was the beginning of the Plains. And it was just north east of here that Tom had seen his cloud.

I gave a little start of surprise when the edge of the thing first appeared ahead of us. So it *was* there, after all.

It stood out against the deep purple sky just like any other cloud, only this cloud just couldn't exist under those conditions. As we closed the distance the whiteness assumed a more greyish colour.

I'll never forget the look on Commander Thompson's face when he first beheld the cloud. It was like watching a dogged, determined fighter come up against a k.o.

Ted is, by nature, a character with his two feet solidly imbedded in reality. In his job anything else would be disastrous. When you're saddled with a bunch of dreaming boffins it's just as well to keep your head above them, otherwise there would be one awful mess. You only had to look at his strong, determined jaw and weather-beaten features to know that here was a man who stood for little nonsense. Together, we shared the advantage of years over the rest of Base personnel. Ted was fifty-two and I was forty-nine, which made the rest of the boys around us seem kids. I suppose the dry, decaying atmosphere of Mars agreed with old buzzards like us. At least, we *felt* that old.

It was quiet for some time in the jeep while the Cloud came up to meet us, swelling before us like a great, motionless egg. Only the low hum of the motors disturbed the stillness. Overhead the purple, almost black sky shone sharply through

the plasti-glass canopy, a host of stars twinkling coldly through the thin air. Inside, we breathed comfortably without the need for suits. Below, the dry sands were whipped up by our pulsating jets.

Next to me, McGivern said : " It's growing. It is getting bigger."

" Are you sure ?" I asked, doubtful. He nodded. I left acceptance of his statement to a later date. In the meantime, there was the cloud as it was to consider.

" It's queer," Thompson grunted, just a suggestion of nervousness hovering behind his quiet pronouncement. " It *can't* be a cloud, though." He leant over Stewart at the controls of the floater. " Better cut speed."

The boy nodded assent. The whine of the motors dwindled slowly. His eyes, like all of us, were glued on the expanding spectre of the Cloud.

By now, it most definitely had become The Cloud.

It grew and spread before us like a monstrous raincloud with ridiculously symmetrical edges. We guessed it to be about four miles across and possibly two hundred feet high. The depth we would ascertain when we cruised round the thing.

While it had the appearance of a terrestrial cloud, there all semblance ended. Apart from the clean edges of the thing it was obviously not in motion. The surface was as blank and as featureless as a wall. It just lay there on the desert floor as though it belonged there.

And that was impossible. Any moisture in the thing would long ago have been absorbed by the hungry desert.

" Stop the jeep," Thompson said. Stewart's hands flickered over the controls and the hovercraft slackened speed right off and descended slowly to the desert floor.

Silence lay heavily around us. Outside, the wall of the cloud stretched away on either side of us, a bare two hundred yards away. We sat and stared at it for a while and listened to McGivern go over his story for the commander's benefit.

" You flew through it ?" he asked, a trifle roughly.

" Yes, sir. I guess I just wanted to convince myself it was really there." He must have realised then what a risk he had been taking and I wondered how he had found the nerve to do it. I certainly wouldn't have liked to have tried, but then I never was one to stick my neck out.

Thompson scowled at the enigma beyond the canopy. If not a cloud or a fog or a mist of some sort, what the devil was it?

"Take her around," he directed. "Slowly. I want to get a good look at this thing. Make a nice, easy circuit."

Stewart started the motors up and eased the floater up to a steady fifteen mph and took her on a long sweep around The Cloud. It still refused to offer any further revelations to our searching eyes. Disgruntled, Thompson ordered a quick run through the outer fringes of it.

It was like sailing through a very fine mist, just thin enough to blur the details of the desert outside. Nothing unpleasant. One thing we did notice was that it didn't seem to hold back the sunlight to any degree. If anything, it seemed actually brighter.

Score two for the mysterious Cloud.

We swam around in it for some time, like curious fish in an unfamiliar pond. Finally, our curiosity unsated, Thompson ordered Stewart to head back to Base. The Cloud had defeated our explorations admirably.

"I'll send somebody out to get some samples of that stuff," he said, sitting back thoughtfully in his seat. "*And* I want a watch put on it—day and night. If anything's going to happen out there I want us to be in on it. This could be the first time we've ever been able to witness something going on on this damned planet."

We sped out of the Cloud and left it lying quietly on the desert floor and headed basewards at maximum acceleration.

There was no sense in keeping up the secrecy clamp now that we had verified McGivern's find. Within a few minutes of our return I knew that word of our discovery would be all over Base and I wanted to tell Eric personally; I felt he would appreciate that.

He was in his workroom when I went to find him, sitting down at his rock-strewn bench and toying with a piece of ochre-coloured slate brought in from the Wall. His lean, eager young face was drawn into hard, tired lines by fatigue. His ice-blue eyes were dull and lacking their customary alertness as they stared at the priceless remnant of a dead civilisation. The slump of his shoulders told more than words could tell the sum weight of his defeat.

I thumped him lightly on the shoulder. "How's tricks?"

He looked up. "Oh, hello Frank. What brings you over? Anxious to view the latest discovery of the archaeological team?" Cynicism twisted his words into a wry parody of pleasure. "Take a look at this, will you."

He handed me the piece of rock and I turned it over carefully in my hands. It looked for all the world just like any other lump of rock. It could have been anything.

He must have caught this expression in my eyes. "I couldn't agree more," he grunted, good naturedly. "You see those chicken scratches down in the left hand corner there? Well, believe it or not they just might be writing of some sort."

He thumped his hand down on the dusty bench top. "Chicken scratches. Nothing but chicken scratches." His jaw worked angrily and he stared at the collection of rocks and pieces of slate lining the bench. "How's a man to make any sense out of all this stuff? At least back home you've got something to work on, comparisons with other cultures and all that. But *this* . . ." He waved a hand to encompass the sum of his work and swung around to face me. "I don't know, Frank. Sometimes I feel like chucking the whole thing in. I begin to wonder if it's really worth it."

I shrugged. "I suppose we all feel like that now and again, even me. Have you any idea how bloody monotonous, how pointless those mosaics seem to me? God, sometimes I'd give anything to be . . . to be out digging like mad along that Wall of yours."

"You can have it, anytime. This whole business of chasing the past never did seem to make any sense to me, you know that? Every time I pick up a hunk of rock on Earth or the moon or here for that matter, I get so god-damned mad that all that is great and grand in the past has vanished forever, never to be seen again."

He placed the piece of ochre slate with the other neatly numbered and identified relics of the past. "It all finishes up as dust, anyway."

He looked up. "Was there something you wanted to see me about?"

I sat down on a stool. "As a matter of fact, there was. We've stumbled on to something queer out on the Plains . . ."

He listened to my story with barely disguised cynicism. Long experience had taught him to be dubious of other people's ideas. "It sounds like a mirage to me," was his immediate comment.

"It can't be. We flew through the stuff and it was quite tangible."

"Mirages are like that."

"Maybe so—but can you imagine a mirage developing in *this* imitation of an atmosphere?"

"No, but I can imagine one developing in impressionable minds."

"Me, Eric?"

He grinned and looked a little taken aback. The tension seemed to have drained a little from within him. His face was struggling back towards that boyish dreamer I had come to know so well.

"It's tangible enough for Thompson to want to put a guard on it," I pointed out.

"Is he afraid of it running away or something?"

"Not exactly. But McGivern seems to think it's growing."

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully, indicating a developing interest in what I was describing.

"We're going out again to take some samples of the air inside the thing," I said. "I thought you might like to come along . . ."

He regarded me carefully, his face slowly assuming a serious puzzled look. "It does sound interesting, at that. I guess I may as well come along with you."

That afternoon Thompson had one of the big floaters broken out of storage and fitted out with an oxygen recirculating unit. It certainly looked as though he was preparing for an indefinite siege of the thing on the Plains and didn't want us to be hampered by the uncomfortable survival suits.

After McGivern had crammed a formidable amount of photographic equipment on board we headed off towards the Plains again. This time we had two extra on board, Eric and Jim Andrews. Jim had come along to collect some samples of the atmosphere within the cloud to see if he could find out what the stuff consisted of.

We were accompanied by a half dozen of the smaller jeeps loaded up with base personnel coming along to have a look at the thing they had already heard so much about.

This time, McGivern took over the business of piloting us to the Cloud. Stewart sat alongside him in case he wanted to get to work with his cameras during the flight. We settled down in our seats and waited for the machine to bring us down alongside our enigmatic Cloud.

The trip seemed to take an eternity. The floater was a great, lumbering beast that pushed along at a maximum speed of a little over ninety mph. The jeeps had to throttle well back to keep from outpacing us.

With the exception of a few brief exchanges between Thompson and McGivern the journey stretched into a prolonged silence. I suppose we were all busy chewing away at our own particular theories. Only Tom seemed truly thrilled at the prospect before us. The rest of us seemed to be wearing a cloak of brooding expectancy.

Finally, the upper fringe of the Cloud appeared on the horizon. Eric was instantly upright and staring at the thing with narrowed, curious eyes. I was again impressed by the peculiar regularity of the thing, quite unlike any terrestrial cloud or mist. I mentioned this to Eric but he just grunted non-committally and stared steadily ahead.

When the thing had swept up to a reasonably close distance, Thompson ordered the floater down. We settled heavily in the sand about a quarter of a mile from the Cloud. While we struggled into our suits the jeeps from Base settled slowly around us like a swarm of bees.

Once outside, we stood and watched McGivern and Andrews stride purposefully off in the direction of the Cloud to collect atmospheric samples. The men from the jeeps grouped around us and filled the frigid air with their wisecracks. Wisecracks that concealed an infinite amount of awe and superstition.

The Cloud stretched away from us on both sides like a great, white wall. Its exterior surface was a silky, smooth texture completely without signs of turbulence. Sharp eyes could detect slight discolourings here and there across its broad surface. Others insisted that the thing seemed to glimmer slightly.

The two men wandered about inside the fringes of the Cloud for a few moments like little fish in an aquarium. The stuff seemed to be denser than it had in the morning, or was that just my imagination playing tricks?

After about five minutes they walked back out of the Cloud and joined us at the floater. Andrews reported no apparent sensations upon entering or leaving the thing. Visibility was reduced to a certain extent and, on the whole, it had seemed brighter inside the Cloud than standing on the Plains. That tallied with our earlier impressions.

"I still think it's growing," McGivern said. His face was flushed and excited behind the helmet. "It seems to be thicker than this morning, too."

They had scoured the surface inside the Cloud to see if there were any fissures or cracks in the desert floor, on the off chance that the Cloud was formed by vapours rising from beneath the planet's crust. The idea didn't meet with much acceptance. It still wouldn't explain the motionless posture of the Cloud itself. But still, anything was worth trying. There had to be an answer somewhere.

If there was some peculiar sort of gas rising up through a crack in the surface of the planet then it would take quite a while to locate it. At a rough guess the Cloud now covered an area of twelve square miles. Thompson ordered two of the jeeps to take a swift run through the thing and see if they could see anything deeper within it. They were to keep in constant radio contact all the time.

The result was negative. The Cloud was cloud all the way through and the surface of the desert beneath was as smooth as a billiard table.

Andrews was whisked back to Base aboard one of the jeeps to run his tests on the samples he had taken. McGivern took off and began to circle up and around and above the Cloud busily taking movies in black and white, colour and infra-red. After he had completed this he flipped over to a small knoll that was probably the remains of a mountain a good five miles away and set up two time-lapse cine cameras to record any change in the growth of the Cloud. He was still convinced that the thing was expanding at a measurable rate.

Eric drove a tripod into the sand where the Cloud began and walked back to the floater and joined us while we waited for word over the radio for the result of Andrew's test.

When the verdict finally crackled over the speaker inside the Floater we were staggered. The analysis showed that the air inside the Cloud was definitely not Mars normal. Nor was it a mysterious gas wafting up from the depths of the

planet. It consisted of all the normal trace gases present in the thin Martian atmosphere, except that there was an increase of 12% over the accepted norm. That on its own was enough to puzzle us further. But it didn't account for the appearance of the Cloud. Its analysis had not been sufficiently dense to behave the way it did. It was still a long way off from Earth normal.

What *was* responsible for the enigma?

"I'd better get back to Base," Thompson announced, wearily. "We'll have to try and get through to Earth and tell them about this. Which of you guys want to stay and watch over this thing?"

McGivern arrived back just in time to volunteer as first watch. Eric and I agreed to stay with him until the next day when another bunch could take over. I didn't say it then but I thought they'd have fat chance trying to pull us away from here for at least forty-eight hours.

Sunset heralded the beginning of the longest night we had ever known. The Cloud refused to succumb to the descending canopy of darkness. It continued to glow with the brilliance of daylight, all alone on the frigid, below-zero plain.

It wasn't as if it shone like an incandescent bulb, but more like it just refused to accept the coming of night and continued in the same way as it had all day.

McGivern radioed Base immediately we became certain that the thing was going to stay like that. Thompson's voice barked purposefully back at us.

"I want you fellows to be careful out there. God knows what this thing is—but I don't want you taking any risks, is that clear?"

Quite clear, we assented. He growled at us for a few moments longer and then went back to a sleepless bed. If his intention had been to steady our nerves then he succeeded—for a while.

I turned away from the radio and there was Eric staring out at the Cloud with a strange, puzzled look in his eyes. It wasn't the same look I had seen in Tom's eyes, or the Commander's. This was a different expression, almost as though he was seeing further than our own nervous minds could see. Perhaps into the very soul of the Cloud itself.

There was a gentle whirr as McGivern started up his cameras to record this latest manifestation of the Cloud.

"Tom," Eric said, snapping out of his reverie, "what exposure are you using?"

"F.16 at 32 f.p.s."

"That's the same exposure you've been using all day, isn't it?"

"As a matter of fact it is." The boy's voice trailed off into a curious murmur as he realised what Eric was driving at.

The Cloud hadn't changed in any way. Or had it . . . ?

Eric looked at me, a ghost of a smile tugging gently at the corners of his mouth. "Well Frank, it looks like we've finally come up against it, doesn't it?"

I nodded, sitting down beside him on the bench seat and staring out at the Cloud. "What do you think it is?"

"God knows." The glow from the thing outside washed over us. It was like watching a slice out of daytime in the middle of the night.

"It's alien," he said, softly, the light of triumph glinting in his cold blue eyes. "Really alien. The first time we've ever found something beyond our comprehension."

"We'll figure it out," I said, hopefully.

"Will we?" He rose and strode over to the canopy and stared out at the thing. "I wonder?"

He stood there, unmoving and unconscious of the other two of us in the floater, and stared out at the face of the Unknown.

Sometime during the night I must have dozed off. I was awakened abruptly by McGivern shaking my shoulder and calling out something to the effect that Eric was gone.

I was instantly awake. I jumped to my feet and dashed over to the controls and stared out through the canopy. I was just in time to see his suited figure, complete with a heavy self-contained oxygen unit on his back, disappearing into the searing brilliance of the Cloud. For a moment he was silhouetted against the glaring white light, and then he was gone, swallowed up by the thing.

He had gone off without a suit radio, otherwise I could have roared hell out of him to return. Swearing heavily, I raised Base and told Thompson what had happened.

"The stupid bloody fool!" he exploded. "Who let him do that?"

Rather sheepishly, I explained that Tom and myself had fallen asleep. After spending a few seconds tearing us to pieces he relapsed into relative ease again.

"What does he think he's trying to prove?" he snapped, irritably. I didn't try to explain; I doubted if he could understand a complex character like Eric Kemp. I found it difficult myself, and I had known him far longer than our commanding officer.

"Don't either of you attempt to follow him. That's an order. I'll be out there first thing in the morning. Call me immediately if anything further develops."

He switched off and left us staring silently at the radio. I supposed he was having a sleepless night out of all this. Well, weren't we all?

I tried to picture what it must be like out there. Just wandering around in a great white Cloud and not knowing whether it was real or a product of your own subconscious.

It seemed as though Eric had simply taken up the personal challenge offered by the Cloud and had gone out to meet it face to face. But how could he hope to find anything except the ghostly, intangible matter of the thing?

He had always been a dreamer. Not in the lazy, lethargic manner of most dreamers. He built a solid highway towards the hazy substance of his dreams and forged his way doggedly forward towards his goal. His one desire since he had been old enough to wonder had been to unearth some intangible, something unknown, something man had never before encountered in all his narrow existence on his pitiful mud-ball of a world.

Something alien. Something to open the eyes of all mankind for centuries to come.

I first met him at the moonbase, when I shipped out from Earth to take charge of the mapping of the satellite for geological exploitation, some five years ago. In that time we became very close friends, closer than the gulf of years would ordinarily have allowed. I like to think it was because we understood each other's way of thinking so well.

But no alien discoveries yielded to his probing eyes. The moon was a barren corpse of a world. His dreams were fore-stalled, and instead his eyes turned towards man's next leap into space.

Mars was a corpse of another kind. It chose instead to reveal a few pitiful relics of a civilization dead a million years before we even began thinking of manned spaceflight. This

time, the elusive unknown left a bitter taste in his mouth. This time he had been close . . . but a million years too late.

And now—the Cloud.

For some reason our fear of the thing outside led us to believe that we might never see Eric again, particularly when it began that weird shimmering. I thought my eyes had just become tired from staring too long at its searing brightness, but no, it did appear to be acting queerly.

These were the first real signs of activity within the cloud since we had discovered it.

A while later McGivern spotted Eric's figure emerging from the Cloud and moving slowly towards us. Relief flooded over me. But something nagged at the back of my mind. Something was missing.

The marker. The tripod Eric had driven into the ground that afternoon. It was gone !

I was still worrying over it when he crawled through the lock and stood grinning at us from behind his helmet.

"You certainly look cheerful," he remarked, slowly clambering out of the suit. "What's the matter, were you expecting a ghost or something?" His face was flushed with excitement just as if he had returned from a brisk walk along a windy shore.

"Did you see anything?" McGivern asked, his voice a little too highly pitched.

"Nothing. Not a damn thing." He shrugged off the last of the suit and walked over and sat down in front of the controls. "It's just the same as before only it's daylight out there and night everywhere else.

"Queer. Damned queer." He shook his head in a puzzled way and brooded thoughtfully out the canopy.

"It's not quite the same," I pointed out. "It seems to be shimmering or something."

His eyes narrowed. "You're right. It is up to something."

And then I remembered about the marker. "What about the tripod?"

"The tripod? Oh . . ." And then he realised that it had disappeared from outside, swallowed up by the advancing spectre of the Cloud.

The following morning Thompson returned from Base accompanied by a flurry of jeeps scurrying low across the dunes. We greeted them with bleary eyes and empty stomachs. The commander patiently heard out our story of the queer shimmering in the Cloud and immediately despatched two of the jeeps to locate Eric's marker.

They found the tripod seven hundred yards inside the Cloud. He immediately ordered the entire crew to withdraw for two miles.

While we hurriedly downed a welcome breakfast, Andrews was whisked into the Cloud to collect more samples and then flown back to base by the swiftest hot-rod available.

Eric received a rather luke-warm dressingdown for his escapade of the previous night. I think the increasing worry of the cloud had dulled Thompson's anger somewhat. There were more important things to be concerned with at the moment.

Such as Andrew's latest analysis of the Cloud's atmosphere. Density was up a further 10% from yesterday, bringing the air inside the thing up to plus 22% Mars-normal.

That was almost breathable.

"By the way," Thompson said, sipping coffee quietly in the seclusion of the floater, "you can take a quick flip back to Base, Eric. The boys are excited over something they've found on the wall. I think you'd better go and see what all the fuss is about."

Rather reluctantly, Eric complied. I could see that he didn't really want to leave the Cloud. Decaying pieces of shale and slate couldn't hope to compete with the excitement facing us on the Plains. Still, the job must go on.

"It won't take you long," Thompson said, understandingly. "I'll get one of the boys to fly you straight back. No doubt you're as interested as the rest of us in finding out what's going on here."

"Thank you, sir."

Eric crawled out of the lock and made his way over to one of the jeeps. The commander sat staring thoughtfully at the Cloud.

Curious and curiouser. It was beginning to change colour. It was losing the startling whiteness that had first impressed us and assuming patches of dirty-grey that seemed to be, imperceptibly, in motion. Yet the cloud itself remained motionless on the floor of the desert. It had extended its boundaries a

good half a mile since we had first discovered it. Thompson's action in pulling the crew back a couple of miles indicated that he expected further advances to be made in a rapidly accelerating process.

The fissure idea now seemed out of the question. No further theories were forthcoming. Like ignorant savages, we just waited for something to happen.

By mid-day the Cloud had advanced a further quarter of a mile and Eric had arrived back from Base. In his hands he carried a set of photographs for the rest of us to see.

The cause of all the hullaballo back at the base was slight compared to the growing drama of the Cloud. Apparently, some of the boys' patient chipping and rubbing had been rewarded by the discovery of a delicate freize twenty feet down below surface level on the unimaginably deep wall.

It wasn't much. Just a few 'chicken scratches' as Eric would have called them, but they did provide the first continuous set of heiroglyphics we had obtained. They appeared to represent stylised depictions of the Martian race, Eric explained, rather pleased with this reward for their painstaking care after six back-breaking months bent double in survival suits and chipping away at the weathered, sand-encrusted face of the Wall.

But it wasn't any Rosetta stone. And there was still a vast, unknown amount of the wall to be cleared and examined. The job would go on for years.

For the time being, the mystery of the Cloud assumed prime importance. After a brief discussion Eric put the prints away and concentrated on the scene on the Plains.

The Cloud was growing rapidly, pushing out its boundaries now at the rate of a hundred yards every two hours. There seemed no end to its growth. And we were still no nearer a solution than before.

Around about four o'clock Andrews was flown over to collect a fresh set of samples. This time his analysis showed a fantastic increase of a further 38%.

In other words, a man could breathe inside the Cloud without the need of an oxygen tank.

And it was warm. Andrews had taken a thermometer with him this time and recorded a temperature of forty-eight fahrenheit. Compared to the twenty below zero we were accustomed to, that was *warm*.

Towards evening, we sat in the floater interminably drinking coffee and batting opinions back and forth. Mostly they fell soggly to the floor, overladen with hypotheses and theories closer to fantasy than anything else. But there had to be some way to explain the thing out there on the Plains.

McGivern was the first to notice the increased signs of activity within the Cloud. His cry drew our attention to the enigma and while he busied himself with his cameras we stared out at this new manifestation.

Within the dirty-grey wall of brightness, something moved. It was impossible to distinguish exactly *what* it was, only to realise that movement was present, and movement on a vastly more accelerated scale than we had been watching for the past eight hours. It seemed that the very stuff of the Cloud was rolling and twisting in upon itself, undulating with a regular rhythm. The edges were no longer clearly defined, either. The perimeter of the Cloud now faded off and lost density in much the same manner that a fog or mist would appear thinner at the edges.

The edges were the section in most violent upheaval. They rolled and curled as though in mortal torment. It was enough to make us go cold over.

"Hell," was all I could think of to say. And backed away a step from the canopy.

Beside me, I heard a click as McGivern switched off his time-lapse camera. There was little point in using it now that the activity in the Cloud had speeded up. He put a call through to the two boys operating the unit on the far dune and asked them to set it back to a normal 32 f.p.s.

Activity increased within the Cloud all through the ghostly night. Great shapes seemed to flash across its stormy surface like phantom images fleeing suspicious retinas.

We watched it until dawn, our eyes weak and tired with fatigue but unable to give up the battle with the need to watch the awesome sight beyond the floater.

Andrews made his last collection of samples around ten o'clock. We all thought him rather mad to attempt it under the circumstances, but he gathered enough courage for a quick flip into the Cloud and out again. This time the report showed an oxygen content slightly higher than Earth normal.

The temperature inside the Cloud was eighty-four degrees, fahrenheit.

By twelve o'clock it had expanded another half mile and showed no signs of letting up. The whole substance of the thing was now violently in motion, criss-crossed by constantly changing patterns of stress.

"When is it going to stop?" Thompson asked, his words dulled by fatigue and apprehension. Reluctantly he ordered no further trips to be made into the Cloud. With the temperature going up so rapidly there was no telling what might happen. The thing had developed beyond our limited ability to explain.

He ordered the withdrawal of the unit three miles further behind the low line of dunes that had served as our look-out. At the same time Eric put in his request to stay behind in the floater and observe the Cloud from within when it rolled over our present position.

"It's the only way we're ever likely to find out what it's all about, sir," he explained.

"I never thought you were that mad, Kemp," Thompson grunted, half in admiration. "But I don't think there's any possible hope of us finding out anything that way. The whole thing could combust and blow us off the face of the planet."

"Andrews doesn't seem to think so. He says the atmospheric content . . .

"To hell with Andrews! The damn thing's alien. How can we expect to pass judgment on it?"

"I'd like to point out, sir," Eric said, quietly, "that no problem has ever been solved by running away from it. I'm willing to take the chance."

But McGivern was already requesting permission to stay behind with Eric. He reckoned he would be able to get some quite spectacular shots at close range when the thing really got moving. Exasperated, Thompson finally gave in.

"All right, then. I'll have the boys bring some food over and you can settle down and see what happens. But I'll give you no longer than twenty-four hours. If you haven't pulled out of that thing by then, then by the living powers I'll come in and drag you out myself!"

He made his way out of the floater muttering something about 'damned heroes' but with a trace of pride in the gentle smile around the corners of his eyes.

During the night the Cloud absorbed the floater. In the morning there was no sign of it on the desert floor. Our last

glimpse of it had been as a silhouette against the unearthly glow that slowly rolled over it. And then it was gone.

The new day brought a strange calm over the Cloud. It existed now as a soft, delicate grey shroud over the land. No more did it appear as a clearly defined, egg-shaped object. It was beginning to look more and more like the way a cloud should look. But we weren't easily fooled.

It seemed to have stopped expanding and lay quiescent on the floor of the Plains. The very air around us seemed charged with expectancy. The stillness lay heavily across the land.

Now the waiting became critical. Since the Cloud had stopped performing we had had little to occupy our strained nerves. One thing we had found out that upset us ; it was impossible to make radio contact with Eric and McGivern in the floater. The cloud seemed to have developed a tremendous talent for static which made it useless trying to communicate. So we just sat down and waited. We should have been used to it by now, but it hadn't been this bad before.

Sometime after lunch the Cloud began to shimmer violently. While we were still debating this new occurrence one of the boys yelled out that he could see something inside the mist. For a while we accused him of imagining things, but later it became obvious that we were seeing things his own sharper vision had detected long before ours.

Gradually, the hazy lines of a mammoth mountain range became visible through the now tenuous vapours of the Cloud.

In the floater, Eric and McGivern watched the patterns around them converge into visible outlines. As they made out the shape of the mountains emerging in the distance they felt their scalps begin to prickle. Cut off as they were from any contact with us beyond the sand dunes, they were left to suppress their own galloping imaginations.

McGivern's cameras whirled constantly, recording the shifting, changing patterns visible beyond the canopy. Only the mountain range was recognizeable amongst the chaos of swirling colours outside. What would come next they had no idea ; the whole concept stretched their imaginations to the limit.

They had realised by now that they were witnesses to a drama of truly cosmic scale. What it would eventually lead to they couldn't even guess, but they were willing to go along with it. Eric had no intention of pulling the floater out of the mess and

fleeing back to join us. He had come too far and lost too many years to let this slip through his fingers. The feeling sent a strange exhilaration flooding through his system.

McGivern watched the scene outside with a rising excitement that dispelled thoughts of danger. This was a once in a lifetime experience and he intended to enjoy it to the full. Thoughts of personal safety never entered his mind.

Of such stuff are heroes born.

From our position of comparative safety we could observe the constantly changing patterns weaving across the Cloud much better than their limited close-up look. The whole thing was shimmering or vibrating so much that it was difficult to look directly at it for too long a time. By now we had all thrown our pet theories overboard and become resigned to the fact that we were all victims of some gigantic optical illusion. That way it was possible to accept what was happening without the risk of going mad.

For staring too long at the pictures forming out of the stuff of the Cloud Eric was rewarded with a thundering headache. McGivern forced a couple of pills upon him and told him to rest up a bit. Reluctantly he did so, only too aware of the necessity of having a clear head for what still lay ahead of them. He sat wearily down after taking the pills and within five minutes had fallen asleep.

He was shaken rudely awake in the early hours of the morning by McGivern's rough pummelling and a voice verging on hysteria.

"Eric, Eric ! Am I going mad, am I going *crazy* . . . ?"

The boy's fear acted better than a bucket of water. He was instantly on his feet and wide awake and following the direction of McGivern's pointing finger.

The Cloud was gone. In its place a jagged mountain range ran across the horizon, menacing real and solid, the culmination of the ghostly images they had seen earlier the following day. Its outlines were a little obscured by the long columns of dust rising high into the astonishingly blue sky that was unlike any sky Eric had ever seen on Mars. The dust was thrown up by the immense procession of people and machinery that passed around the floater.

Were they both mad, then, to conjure up this spectacle of alien reality ? Had the stuff of the Cloud curdled their brains ?

"Start the cameras, for God's sake," Eric said, hoarsely.

"They're going," McGivern explained, his teeth chattering a little in the silence of the floater.

Eric walked forward and stared at the fantastic scene outside.

The whole thing was impossible. He kept telling himself that all the time his mind marvelled at what he saw. Utterly impossible. Nevertheless, it was there, for some reason or another, and he didn't believe his imagination could ever conjure up a scene as alien as this.

Alien. That was the word.

The people parading by outside were obviously not human. Humanoid, yes, and in a way remarkably similar to human beings. But they were tall and heavily muscled and with the finely cut features of the ancient Greeks. Their eyes had a distinctly Asiatic slant and were much larger than terran eyes.

Martians? Still alive in a dead world a million years after it had fallen to the ravages of time?

It was enough to shatter the credulity of the most stubborn minded men.

"Is it real?" McGivern asked, nervously.

Eric nodded. "Real to us, and that's all that matters."

"What's causing it then?"

"I wish I knew. I do wish I knew . . ."

"They're not . . . human, are they?"

"Do they look it?"

McGivern shook his head. No they didn't *look* human, but you couldn't overlook the astonishing likeness. Particularly when you had automatically prepared yourself for something completely alien to your own way of life.

The few chicken-scratches uncovered on the wall had revealed drawings of beings roughly humanoid. If you took that to mean a highly stylised form of art then you could quite easily recognise the beings outside the floater as genuine Martians. But how . . .?

"I don't believe it," McGivern said.

"You don't have to. Just make sure those cameras keep ticking over and slam some more film into them when they run out."

He reluctantly turned his attention back to the three cameras while Eric studied the people marching steadily past the floater. Their stride was enormous. They must have been something like seven or eight feet tall. Magnificent, towering specimens.

Male, probably, but not for certain. After all, they *were* an alien race, of that there could be little doubt.

Each one was clad in a sort of tunic and harness which left most of their chest bare and supported objects suspiciously resembling armaments across their massive shoulders. Their dark brown skins glistened with perspiration. They marched steadily ahead with their eyes fixed on an unseen objective far in the distance.

Towards the mountains.

"Why don't they see us?" McGivern asked.

"Because they can't, I suppose. Why else?" He turned around and looked back across the sea of faces towards the sand dunes beyond. Only there weren't any. The world seemed to end abruptly where the marching columns disappeared into thin air. There was no sign of the commander or his group.

He felt suddenly cold. The Cloud had ended just about where the marching columns faded away into nothingness.

"Tom," he said, quietly. "Don't panic, but I can't see the commander's men anymore."

McGivern eyes endeavoured to open wider than they already were. He pushed past Eric and walked to the other end of the floater and stared back at the end of the world. When he turned around a strange calm seemed to have settled over him.

"Well," he said, walking slowly back. "Where the hell are we now?"

It was a good question.

From our position atop the dunes we had watched the Cloud finally play itself out and assume the fantastic shape it now took before our disbelieving eyes. Through the night we had watched the pictures begin to form and take definite shape, until the morning greeted us with a sight more incredible than we had ever hoped to witness.

The mountains had emerged clear and angrily distinct in the distance. The substance of the Cloud itself had apparently dissipated to be replaced by the moving patterns that finally resolved into immense columns of men marching steadily towards the distant mountains. They emerged out of nothing at what had been the edge of the Cloud and disappeared into the hazy distance.

We thought of them as men because they marched like men. More precisely, they marched like *soldiers*, and when we put the 'scopes on them we discovered that they also carried their weapons like men. Across their heavily muscled shoulders.

It could only be an army, an army such as no Earthman had ever before seen. The fact that they possessed a striking similarity to human beings only made the whole business more remarkable. There immediately rose in our minds the possibility of mankind having sprung from identical stock as other stellar races. It raised hopes of future contact with beings more like ourselves than the bug-eyed monsters we had imagined.

But could those creatures out there be *Martians*?

And how had the cloud been connected with this?

We were so busy arguing over the whole impossible business that it took us some time to notice the vast, incredible machines crawling slowly across the desert ahead of the marching columns. And far in the distance, almost invisible amidst the shimmering heat haze of a world basking in the warmth of a sun unlike the one resting over our own heads, the delicate spires of a fairy city rose to greet the mountains.

And of the floater there was no sign.

"We're lost," Eric said.

"Lost? Where?"

Eric turned around slowly in his seat and rested his tired, anxious eyes on McGivern's frightened face.

"In time. I guess."

"What do you mean?"

He waved a hand to indicate the scene outside. "They don't exist in our world any more than we do in theirs, so they naturally can't acknowledge our existence. But we can see them. Don't ask me why we can, it's not my business to interpret Reality and what binds it together."

As he spoke he let his eyes wander over the scene outside with a certain satisfaction. He had come at last face to face with his adversary. He had breathed the essence of the Unknown. He had tasted its draught and felt no fear. He had found his Nirvana at last.

"The Cloud," he said, "must have been some sort of temporal displacement. It's almost certainly happened in our own probability track, on Earth, many times over the centuries. God knows there's enough unexplained phenomena in our past

and our present. But nothing was ever on such a grand scale as this. But how . . .”

His mind wandered through a wilderness of chaotic metaphysics in search of an answer to the enigma.

“Something like an echo,” he went on. “An echo of some cosmic event across the corridors of time to our own *now*. That’s why it built up gradually to form this solid existence. It couldn’t happen all at once. Temporal reverberation had to take place somewhere along the line. And, like all echoes, it will ultimately fade . . .”

He jumped quickly to his feet. “Have you any still cameras?”

McGivern eyed him curiously. “There’s a Leica . . .”

“Give it to me. And some film. As much as you’ve got. There mightn’t be very much time left.”

While the boy loaded the camera he struggled quickly into a suit, wondering whether or not he’d have enough time to do what he wanted to do.

He grabbed the camera from McGivern’s hands and stuffed a couple of cassettes of film into a zippered outer pocket. He discarded the helmet hurriedly and clambered out through the air-lock. The air outside was considerably denser than Earth’s anyway. He didn’t wish to be encumbered by the helmet when using the camera.

He landed heavily on the Martian soil and took a breath of the alien air. It was intoxicatingly fresh, quite unlike the canned stuff they were used to breathing. And no wonder—it was the atmosphere of Mars a million years ago.

He turned his attention to the grim lines of marching figures streaming inexorably past the floater. His camera was instantly in action, recording the people from an unimaginably great distance in the past. It was the opportunity of a hundred lifetimes. No, a million.

McGivern watched his movements anxiously. He hadn’t attempted to argue with him. He knew determination when he saw it. All he could do was watch and hope for the best. He tried unsuccessfully to raise the commander and then drifted back to the canopy and stared helplessly out.

Eric moved rapidly along the sea of faces, his camera capturing the extremes of expression amongst the marching men. He saw grief and fear, triumph and disaster, anger and determination, hatred and remorse, all mirrored in the

enormous eyes of the aliens. His camera captured evidence for all time that man alone did not have the monopoly on emotion.

And what were they heading for, these poor, god-like creatures? What destiny awaited the end of their weary journey?

And then he saw the city, rising beneath the towering ramparts of the mountains. A delicate tracery of tall buildings bound together by a gently shimmering light. The air around him seemed to whisper and sing like a melodious breeze.

Why then, the fear in their eyes?

It was impossible to disbelieve that this race and his had not at one time in the remote past, sprang from identical stock. The resemblances were remarkable. What a document they were making with their cameras, his and McGivern's, for the eyes of Man to see and wonder at!

The columns were rumbling to a disturbed halt. He drew himself away from his task and stared up ahead to try and discover the reason for the unrest amongst the marching ranks. The whole tremendous mass seemed to be undulating uncertainly creating a sound which rose like a mighty roar to flood fearfully across the desert. Stark terror leapt into the eyes of those around him.

A great light seemed to blossom over the mountains and sweep out towards them. The whisper around him rose to a terrifying screech as the air was compressed and mutilated by the approach of the dreadful wave of light.

He had no time to think. The great light engulfed them all and he was left standing amidst a great golden curtain of pulsating brightness. The very fabric of space seemed to scream in mortal torment and he felt his mind being ripped to shreds.

He screamed. The sound was caught and twisted obscenely by the forces whipping wildly around him. He toppled and fell into a howling pit of sonic madness and wallowed helplessly in the shambles of reality around him.

He couldn't see a damned thing. Already the world around him was dissolving and running together like a melting motion picture. Faces and people swirled and coalesced into a dull grey murk just as they had appeared, when the Cloud lay still born on the face of the desert.

Dumbly, he realised that he had found his reason for the echoes existence. Not a chance weakness in the fabric of time,

but a rent torn by an unimaginable creation of war that had literally shattered the substance of time and tore this fragment away and hurled it helplessly down the millenia. This it had accomplished within the immediate vicinity of its operation. The rest of it had probably spelt doom for the entire planet and had left this dry husk, stripped of its atmosphere and wallowing uselessly in an orbit around a sorrowful sun for all eternity, or until the genius of man once more brought it to life.

He was finding it difficult to breathe. But of course . . . the echo was fading, much quicker than it had appeared. The atmosphere was returning to Mars normal. And that meant . . .

He cursed the stupidity that had made him leave the helmet and oxygen cylinders back in the floater. If he hadn't been in such a damned hurry . . .

He lay gasping for breath as his dream broke up around him. His last conscious thought was to hang on to the camera at all costs. That was before he fell into the deep well of unconsciousness and waited angrily for death to claim him.

Somehow, McGivern found the courage to overcome his fear. Otherwise, Eric might have died on the desert, gasping away his life like a fish struggling on the shores of a lake.

He slammed on a survival suit and crawled through the air lock and bounded out across the few hundred yards to where Eric's figure sprawled on the dry sands. He half carried, half dragged the body back towards the floater with hysterical speed, feeling all the time that it might already be too late.

He dragged him aboard the floater and dropped him on to the floor. He pumped him like mad for almost half an hour before he gave a great shudder and opened his eyes and stared out at the world again.

He was still pretty groggy when we squeezed in through the airlock and assembled around the interior of the floater, waiting for him to explain what had happened to him out in the middle of all that madness. In the meantime, McGivern obliged by spilling out his own story to our eager ears.

Our voices must have helped to bring Eric out of his fog. He sat up on the floor and looked around. "My camera," he said, hoarsely. "Where's my camera?"

Tom handed him the Leica. "It's okay. You didn't stand much chance of losing it. It took me half an hour to get it out of your hand."

Eric nodded, thankfully. He pushed himself up and stumbled over towards the controls, his eyes staring out at the empty desert beyond. The Plain lay silent and endless beneath the wan light of the afternoon sun. The winds of time had erased the last vestiges of his dream.

His shoulders drooped. He gripped the back of one of the seats and closed his eyes. For a few moments his jaw worked angrily and then he turned around, walked over and sat down on one of the bench seats. He bent his head and stared down at the floor, oblivious to those around him. He looked for all the world like someone who has lost his most precious possession.

And what is more precious than a dream?

The Cloud was gone. There was nothing more to be done. We returned to Base.

And now it's all over. We don't sit around as much as we used to, letting McGivern run through the films over and over again for us, but we still think a lot—and wonder.

There's nothing more to do except await the arrival of the ship from Earth and listen to them accept our story with all the scepticism of the unbelievers. But wait until they see the movies, *and* Eric's stills. That'll show them.

Eric's more impatient than the rest of us. It will be at least another nine months after the ship returns to Earth before he can expect that excavating equipment to arrive. He can't wait to start digging where he thinks that city used to lie out there on the Plains.

We've sent a number of pleading letters back home begging for the equipment but they've ignored every one. Can't say as I blame them ; they must think the whole Mars base has gone psycho.

I wonder how many psychiatrists will be on board the ship when it comes?

Lee Harding